

JERRY ABERSHAW AND THE MEN IN CHAINS.

Townsend, the Bow-street officer's interesting examination before the police committee of the House of Commons, in June, 1816, contains some curious particulars respecting Abershaw, the pirates, "the dangers of the road," and "laughing matters," toward the close of the last century.

Q. The activity of the officers of Bow-street has infinitely increased of late years?

A. No doubt about it; and there is one thing which appears to me most extraordinary, when I remember, in very likely a week, there should be from ten to fifteen highway robberies. We have not had a man committed for a highway robbery lately; I speak of persons on horseback. Formerly there were two, three, or four highwaymen, some on Hounslow Heath, some on Wimbledon Common, some on Finchley Common, some on the Romford Road. I have actually come to Bow-street in the morning, and while I have been leaning over the desk, had three or four people come in and say, 'I was robbed by two highwaymen in such a place;' 'I was robbed by a single highwayman in such a place.' People travel now safely, by means of the horse-patrol that Sir Richard Ford planned. Where are there highway robberies now? As I was observing to the Chancellor, as I was up at his house on the Corn Bill; he said, 'I knew you very well so many years ago.' I said, 'Yes, my lord; I remember your coming first to the bar, first in your plain gown, and then as king's counsel, and now chancellor. Now your lordship sits as chancellor, and directs the executions on the recorder's report; but where are the highway robberies now?' and his lordship said, 'Yes, I am astonished.' There are no footpad robberies or road robberies now, but merely jostling you in the streets. They used to be ready to pop at a man as soon as he let down his glass.

Q. You remember the case of Abershaw?

A. Yes; I had him tucked up where he was; it was through me. I never left a court of justice without having discharged my own feeling as much in favour of the unhappy criminal as I did on the part of the prosecution; and I once applied to Mr. Justice Buller to save two men out of three who were convicted; and on my application we argued a good deal about it. I said, 'My lord, I have no motive but my duty; the jury have pronounced them guilty. I have heard your lordship pronounce sentence of death, and I have now informed you of the different dispositions of the three men. If you choose to execute them all, I have nothing to say about it; but was I you, in the room of being the officer, and you were to tell me what Townsend has told you, I should think it would be a justification of you to reprieve those two unhappy men, and hang that one who has been convicted three times before.' The other men never had been convicted before, and the other had been three times convicted; and he very properly did. And how are judges or justices to know how many times a man has been convicted but by the information of the officer whose duty and department it is to keep a register of old offenders. The magistrate sits up there; he knows nothing of it till the party is brought before him—he cannot.

Q. Do you think any advantages arise from a man being put on a gibbet after his execution?

A. Yes, I was always of that opinion; and I recommended Sir William Scott to hang the two men that are hanging down the river. I will state my reason. We will take for granted that those men were hanged as this morning, for the murder of those revenue officers—they are by law dissected; the sentence is, that afterwards, the body is to go to the surgeons for dissection; there is an end of it—it dies. But look at this: there are a couple of men now hanging near the Thames, where all the sailors must come up; and one says to the other, 'Pray what are those two poor fellows there for?' 'Why,' says another, 'I will go and ask.'

They ask, 'Why, those two men are hung and gibbeted for murdering his majesty's revenue officers.' And so the thing is kept alive. If it was not for this, people would die, and nobody would know any thing of it. In Abershaw's case I said to the sheriff, 'The only difficulty in hanging this fellow, upon this place, is its being so near Lord Spencer's house.' But we went down, and pointed out a particular place; he was hung at the particular pitch of the hill where he used to do the work. If there was a person ever went to see that man hanging, I am sure there was a hundred thousand. I received information that they meant to cut him down. I said to Sir Richard Ford, 'I will counteract this; in order to have it done right, I will go and sit up all night, and have eight or ten officers at a distance, for I shall nail these fellows;' for I talked cant language to them. However, we had the officers there, but nobody ever came, or else, being so close to Kent-street, they would have come down and sawed the gibbet, and taken it all away; for Kent-street was a very desperate place, though it is not so now. Lord Chief Justice Eyre once went the Home Circuit; he began at Hertford, and finished at Kingston. Crimes were so desperate, that in his charge to the grand jury at Hertford, he finished—'Now, gentlemen of the jury, you have heard my opinion as to the enormity of the offences committed; be careful what bills you find, for whatever bills you find, if the parties are convicted before me, if they are convicted for capital offences, I have made up my mind, as I go through the circuit, to execute every one.' He did so—he never saved man or woman—and a singular circumstance occurred, that stands upon record fresh in my mind. There were seven people convicted for a robbery in Kent-street—for calling in a pedlar, and after robbing the man, he jumped out of the window. There were four men and three women concerned; they were all convicted, and all hanged in Kent-street, opposite the door; and, I think, on Kennington Common eight more, making fifteen. All that were convicted were hung.

Q. Do you think, from your long observation, that the morals and manners of the lower people in the metropolis are better or worse than formerly?

A. I am decidedly of opinion that, with respect to the present time, and the early part of my time, such as 1781, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7, where there is one person convicted now—I may say I am positively convinced—there were five then. We never had an execution wherein we did not grace that unfortunate gibbet (at the Old Bailey) with ten, twelve, to thirteen, sixteen and twenty; and forty I once saw, at once; I have them all down at home. In 1783, when Sergeant Adair was recorder, there were forty hung at two executions. The unfortunate people themselves laugh at it now; they call it 'a bagatelle.' I was conversing with an old offender some years ago, who has now quite changed his life; and he said, 'Why, sir, where there is one hung now, there were five when I was young;' and I said, 'Yes, you are right in your calculation, and you were very lucky that you were spared so long and have lived to be a better man.' I agree with George Barrington—whom I brought from Newcastle—and however great Lord Chief Baron Eyre's speech was to him, after he had answered him, it came to this climax: 'Now,' said he, 'Townsend, you heard what the chief baron said to me; a fine flowery speech, was it not?' 'Yes.' 'But he did not answer the question I put to him.' Now how could he? After all that the chief baron said to him after he was acquitted—giving him advice—this word 'was every thing': says he, 'My lord, I have paid great attention to what you have been stating to me, after my acquittal; I return my sincere thanks to the jury for their goodness; but your lordship says, you lament very much that a man of my abilities should not turn my abilities to a better use. Now, my lord, I have only this reply to make: I am ready to go into any service, to work for my labour, if your lordship will but find me a master.'